

The right to education should be a given: What do you do when it's not?

 By [Brett Bowes](#)

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The availability and quality of education still falls far short of students' constitutional rights - but access to better options is possible for those prepared to find and take advantage of corporate assistance.

The biggest challenge facing South Africa's disadvantaged youths is education. Section 29 of the constitution guarantees "everyone" the right to a basic education and further education, which the state, "through reasonable measures, must make progressively available and accessible". An obligation to make that education free for those who cannot afford it is implied, as is an obligation to make sure that all South Africans receive the same quality education, whatever their economic circumstances.

It is clear that we are failing to make this a universal right among the young. In a statement commemorating Human Rights Day on 21 March, 2013, the South African Human Rights Commission (SAHRC) said: "Much still has to be done to ensure not only access to education, but also the quality of education. Poverty remains a significant barrier, with children in the poorest households nearly three times less likely to complete secondary schooling than children in the richest households."

As United Nations HRC rapporteur, Katerina Tomasevski, pointed out in an article for the Education Rights Project: "I read that no child can be turned away from a state school if the parents cannot afford to pay the fees - parents are eligible for an exemption, but how does a parent acquire that exemption? Forms have to be filled in and have to be backed by birth certificates, marriage certificates, the death certificate of your grandfather, signed before a notary, stamped, witnessed ... You have to be able to handle the bureaucratic system to stand any chance of achieving this exemption, but most impoverished parents have little or no education, and are often illiterate."

Many poor parents nevertheless make enormous sacrifices to pay school fees and buy uniforms and supplies, but even after the struggle to get a child into a school is won, the vast majority still face major problems: crumbling infrastructures, underfunded or non-existent learning materials, inadequate security and a shortage of qualified, effective teachers. It is not surprising that so many learners cannot achieve under these circumstances, or that so many grow discouraged and drop out - to the despair of parents who see years of hard work go to waste.

Maths must be a priority

Fifty percent of the learners who started school in 2001 were candidates for matric in 2012; the rest had dropped out or were stuck repeating lower grades. The mathematics pass rate of 54% was hailed as an improvement on the 2011 figure of 46.3%, but in reality, it means that only a quarter of the learners who started school in 2001 passed matric mathematics. The result becomes even less impressive when considering that the matric mathematics pass mark is set at 30%. As Statistician-General Pali Lehohla said in May 2013: "A 30% pass mark will not give South Africa the necessary human resources to work."

Core mathematics is vital in many professions; any child planning to study engineering, medicine, actuarial science, finance or the physical sciences needs to achieve at least 60% in matric mathematics. According to a South African Institute of Race Relations report released on 29 January, 2013, only one learner in 20 who wrote matric mathematics or science in 2012 passed with a mark higher than 50%, let alone 60%. Put simply, fewer than 3% of the 2002 Grade Ones are now eligible to study university degrees that require mathematics. "If I had one wish, it would be that 70% of learners who pass mathematics obtain 60% or more. Can you imagine the effect this would have on our country and its people," said Chantyl Mulder, senior executive of the South African Institute of Chartered Accountants (SAICA). If this dream is going to become a reality, disadvantaged learners and their parents need to see core mathematics as an educational

priority.

Involvement from the private sector

The government is spending an enormous 21% of the national budget on education, but turning the situation around needs involvement from the private sector too. Fortunately, South African business is investing significantly in direct interventions in education. Business leaders realise that this is a matter of long-term business sustainability - one of the biggest threats to economic growth and job creation is a shortage of skills in middle management. Economic growth is simply not possible unless we produce more professional graduates from among the poor. Most of the professional organisations - in engineering, accounting, banking and health care, among others - are now funding programmes to improve the teaching and learning of mathematics and science, starting at school level.

The most effective of these programmes are those that understand all of the obstacles faced by disadvantaged learners. Money is only but one aspect of the problem; homes without water or electricity, long journeys and a lack of graduates as role models and mentors in poor communities and hunger also have a devastating effect on academic performance. If companies are going to identify and support gifted candidates, their programmes need to address all these issues to succeed.

There is support available

Learners determined to overcome their circumstances, in turn, need to know that there is support available - but it's up to them to find the professional body for their chosen career and ask what programmes exist. Anyone considering a career in chartered accountancy should investigate SAICA's Thuthuka Bursary Fund (TBF) Programme. The TBF programme is financed by corporate donors and funds university studies in accountancy. It recognises that empowering exceptionally bright African and coloured learners requires more than simply paying their fees.

"Anyone who goes to university needs a support system," said Jelvin Griffioen, TBF programme manager of the University of Johannesburg (UJ). "It's difficult enough as it is, and if you don't have a core group, or any other family that went to university, it's even harder. Even trying to talk to your parents about problems you're having - they don't have the experience to understand what you're going through. You need a sense of belonging, to feel comfortable."

The TBF provides that support system through bursaries, which not only cover tuition, accommodation, and books, but also includes extensive academic and non-academic support. TBF students are grouped together in the same residences on campus, so first- and second-years have access to mentorship and coaching from third- and fourth-years. TBF students also receive a monthly allowance, so they can participate in student social life and practise the social and professional networking that they will need in their careers. The programme works - TBF students have lower dropout rates and their marks and pass rates are better, in many cases outperforming even more advantaged students. The success and results of this programme have prompted a number of partnerships between Thuthuka and government, designed to improve financial management in the public service.

However, the Thuthuka programme starts even before university - identifying exceptional African and coloured mathematics students at school level and providing extra lessons and other support mechanisms to improve core mathematics knowledge in grades 11 and 12. Students who achieve high mathematics marks are channelled into the TBF programme at various universities. TBF students return to their communities between university terms - and frequently, after graduation - where they are available as mathematics tutors and academic mentors. By finding and supporting the brightest mathematics talents from townships and rural areas, the TBF programme is based on the presumption that it is more likely that those students will return to their areas when they qualify. This not only injects business skills directly into the community, it also provides the role models that school-going youths in those communities often lack, which will hopefully inspire them to focus on their educational possibilities.

All South Africans, whatever their economic status, have a right to quality education. However, simply knowing that this right exists will not make it happen; waiting for a perfect, state-delivered school system will simply take too long for talented and ambitious children in senior school. It's a right many learners have to claim for themselves. South African youths - and their parents - who are determined to do so are already investing everything they can in education, but it is also their responsibility to explore the help available in both the public and private sector. Those who plan to work in finance and accounting need to excel in mathematics at school level - with that in mind, they would do well to investigate the Thuthuka programmes at school and at university levels thoroughly.

ABOUT BRETT BOWES

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